New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1949

Volume X, Number 13 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of May 2, 1949

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Theatre Openings

"The Happiest Years"

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NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK SUN

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, INC., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"The Happiest Years"

Journal and American

APRIL 26, 1949

Peggy Wood Is Fine But Her Role Irritates

By ROBERT GARLAND

Broadway should be brighter when Peggy Wood is on it. Miss Wood is on it now. At the Lyceum, she is in "The Happiest Years" by Thomas Coley and William Roerick. Players-into-playwrights, you remember Mr. Coley as the tough attendant in "Harvey," Mr. Roerick for being all over the one-acters in last season's "Tonight at 8:30."

They have written neither wisely nor well enough for their leading lady's requirements as one of the theatre's first comediennes. In an effort to give Miss Wood a silly but sympathetic role, they have, instead, presented her with a character which, scene by scene and act by act, grows more irritating and unbearable.

Peggy Wood, in turn, does everything she can to lessen the irritation and unbearability which, for reasons of her own, she has brought back with her to Broadway. But, as the madwoman of a small mid-western college town and the mother-in-law of a stubbornly studious GI, she falters as the evening fades.

And you, faltering with Miss Wood and fading with the evening, sit abstractly in your seat lending half-an-ear to the charming rise and fall of the leading lady's voice and half-an-eye to her delightful movements about the stage.

* * *

She's Suspicious

Clara Graves is the madwoman mother-in-law Thomas Coley and William Roerick have fashioned for Peggy Wood to play. I read that she is supposed to be "endearing, albeit suspicious." Well, if Bertram's wife, Martha's mother and Richard's mother-in-law is, from any human point of view, endearing, I ——

But she is suspicious. Suspicious of the studious rapprochement of her son-in-law and an incredibly learned Joan Miller. Miss Miller, known as Jo, and Mr. Johnson, known as Richard, meet upstairs, downstairs and in the public library so that she, a scholar and a lady, can help him learn his lessons.

He wants to be a professor of biology, although his in-laws—father-in-law, mother-in-law, uncle-in-law, aunt-in-law and, up to the final curtain, wife-in-law—urge him to turn his back on learning and become a traveling salesman. They have not seen what happens to traveling salesmen at the Morosco!

Through this and not much else, the Clara Graves who is Peggy Wood moves back and forth, growing, as I have said, more irritating and unbearable. Any husband but Bertram would have long since choked her.

* * *

Watch Her Act

Even so, it is brightening to relax as Miss Wood works her gifted way through the talk-talk-talk of the well-intentioned dialogue. When the assignment irks your nerves, think back to "Blithe Spirit," and "Candida" and "Bitter Sweet" if you were fortunate enough to see her Marchioness of Shayne in London.

In the surrounding cast, June Walker has fun as Florence Graves, whose feet are always hurting. It is fun in which Loring Smith joins whenever possible. Louisa Horton is learnedly obtuse as the trouble-making Joan Miller, blaming everything on her condition.

Richard Bishop is unintelligently long-suffering as Papa Graves, who should have choked Mama Graves a quarter of a century before the play gets going. Jessie Busley has a big little bit as Alida Wentworth. Douglas Watson and Judy Parrish are, I guess, just about what the playwrights called for...

Admiring her tremendously, the mere presence of Miss Wood makes Broadway brighter. But I do wish she had brought with her a brighter character than Clara Graves in a brighter comedy than "The Happiest Years."

'THE HAPPIEST YEARS'

Play by Thomas Coley and William Roerick; staged by James Neilson; setting by James Russell; presented by Gertrude Macy at the Lyceum Theatre, April 25, 1949. The cast:

Martha Johnson...Judy Parrish
Richard Johnson...Douglas Watson
Alida Wentworth...Jessie Busley
Clara Graves.....Peggy Wood
Bertram Graves...Richard Bishop
Roger Littlefield...James Goodwin
Joan Miller.....Louisa Horton
Florence Graves...June Walker
Morton Graves....Loring Smith

Synopsis: The living-room of the Graves home in a small Mid-Western college town. Act I, Ten o'clock of a Friday evening in late January. Act II, Scene 1, 7:45 a.m. the next morning. Scene 2, Nine o'clock the same evening. Act III, Noon the next day.

New York World-Telegram

APRIL 26, 1949

'Happiest Years' Tickle the Hearth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

If the world has a way of seeming too big and complicated to bear, I would heartily recommend an evening's retirement to the Lyceum Theater and "The Happiest Years." The new comedy is a play with a hearth in it. Strictly a family affair, it tells of a week end at home in a warmly unsophisticated circle.

Father is bursar of a small town college and Mother is an earnest sweetheart of a busybody. A simple soul, her thought processes end with the addition of two and two. She knows exactly what to do about the sum, and proceeds to do it with the best hearted motives in the world and sometimes startling results.

Her daughter Martha is married to Richard, a recent GI, who, when he is not fixing the furnace, spends all his waking hours studying the biology he hopes eventually to teach. When he takes to swapping notes and holding cram sessions with a girl in his class, Mother is convinced that he is headed toward infidelity.

Domestic Crisis.

Through concern over her daughter's happiness, she comes perilously close to wrecking the young marriage. There is a domestic crisis over Richard's choosing to study for an examination instead of taking his wife to a dance. Mother nearly drives him into taking a job with her brother-in-law as a salesman, and only relents when it is found he has made an important discovery in his favorite field of study.

There is nothing very shaking or monumental about all this except for the good humored dignity it points out in modest family life.

Mother disapproves of drink stronger than table wine, likes to be left alone when she is cooking, and valiantly attempts to direct the destinies around her while crawling on the floor with a mouthful of pins adjusting the hem of her daughter's dress.

Delightful Distractions.

The play progresses with all the delightful fluttery distractions of any going household. Two people solemnly conduct a dialogue about two entirely different subjects, phone conversations go in the background, and a duet by Alma Gluck and Louise Homer is warbled by the phonograph.

There are plenty of good rich laughs in all this deeply personal turbulence, but the endearing quality of the production arises from the constant relish with which one recognizes familiar situations and reactions. It is a play to savor happily, performed with an exquisite lack of affectation by an expert cast.

Peggy Wood as Mother performs beautifully in a long and rambling role. The character is frankly meddlesome but well meaning, and the star makes her so congenial and affectionate that the patience of her family is entirely understandable. At heart Mother is a rigidly naive person, but Miss Wood plays her with graceful virtuosity that never loses interest or attention.

June Walker Priceless.

June Walker is priceless as the traveling salesman's wife. She garners the most appreciative laughs as an overdressed dumpling who finds her nomadic life filled with glamour and thinks her husband the funniest man alive.

Loring Smith is expertly anthentic with the salesman's hearty corn, and Richard Bishop is a patient and understanding head of the house. As the three young people, Louisa Horton, Judy Parrish and Douglas Watson are entirely personable and believable, and James Goodwin is a concerned freshman in a constant state of embarrassment.

Jessie Busley lends a quaint and fragile sparkle to the elderly boarder who is livelier than she appears.

The direction, the setting and particularly the clothes are utterly appropriate and helpful. It is frankly a pleasure to spend an evening without tragedies, villains or any but the homeliest of lessons.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

APRIL 26, 1949

By HOWARD BARNES

Not So Happy

THE gallant efforts of Peggy Wood and her assistant in "The Happiest Years" make for no more than a smattering of laughter. The new comedy at the Lyceum substitutes wise-cracks for witty lines; random confusion for farcial definition. The star frequently sweeps through a scene with a fine disregard for its essential lack of humor. June Walker and Loring Smith take execrable puns and anecdotes in their stride. But the fact remains that Thomas Coley and William Roerick have thought up a tedious trifle for their celebration of collegiate doings. No amount of acting showmanship could have made it moderately entertaining.

* * *

What there is of a plot is laid in a bursar's home in a small Mid-Western college. There a brilliant biology student copes with a meddlesome mother-in-law, a wife whose looks are not matched by her brains, a recalcitrant furnace and what can only be called comic-strip characters. Having been driven to a night of morose drinking in the cellar, the specialist in genes turns out to be quite a fellow and all ends well, if that is the word to describe the climax of "The Happiest Years." The best thing about the forced joviality of the episode is the final curtain.

* * *

It is a pleasure to see Miss Wood in the theater after the years that have intervened since her memorable performance in "Blithe Spirit," but it is a pity that she has to work with such shoddy material. The mother-in-law she is asked to portray is niggardly, suspicious, avaricious and altogether unsympathetic. By the sheer force of her artistry she brings some touches of dignity and antic enthusiasm to the work, but she has tough going. Miss Taylor, as a sister-in-law whose feet are always hurting, has more opportunity for lusty fun and makes the most of it. She and Smith take over the proceedings rather completely when they are on stage.

* * *

The young people who are supposedly enjoying their happiest years are played by Douglas Watson and Judy Parrish. The former acts properly heckled, if not academically convincing. The latter does little more than walk through a silly role. Jessie Busley adds a crisp bit or two to limp situations as an aging librarian and Richard Bishop is all right as the father. James Neilson has staged the production with a heavy reliance on off-stage sound and light effects. "The Happiest Years" brings able players together, but the occasion is far from felicitous.

Daily Mirror

APRIL 26, 1949

Mother-in-Law No Joke In 'The Happiest Years'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Happiest Years" brought some unhappy moments to at least one first-nighter in the Lyceum Theatre last evening, for the Thomas Coley and William Roerick comedy boasts one of the most annoying and nasty mother-in-laws ever to haunt a script. There have been a lot of jokes about mothers-in-law, but this particular specimen is no joke.

Her daughter is married to an ex-GI, who wants to become a biology instructor. To attain a good mark in his college studies, the boy gets help from a girl student. So mother Graves immediately visualizes an affair between them, and almost sells her daughter on the idea. However, the boy's success brings a prestige that wins over the suspicious scold.

* * *

Coley and Roerick started with a good character study, but stated it in too obvious terms. The mother-in-law could have been an evil, fascinating woman, but as presently drawn she is nothing more than an irritating nag.

To Peggy Wood falls the dominant character, and she plays it with such realism as to give one the willies. That Miss Wood succeeded in being so downright disagreeable is a tribute to her histrionic skill.

The drab script gets a pleasant shot in the arm in the second act with the arrival of Loring Smith and June Walker. They are quite amusing as a breezy, wise-cracking traveling salesman and his brassy, high-spirited second wife.

Louisa Horton, Judy Parrish, Jessie Busley, Douglas Watson, Richard Bishop and James Goodwin do well by other roles. Miss Horton reminds you just a little of Hope Williams, circa, "Holiday." She is going to go places when the right role comes along.

James Neilson, a Guthrie McClintic staffer, merits a bow for the play's staging. The theatre needs new young directors, and Neilson should win other assignments. James Russell has provided a credible atmospheric setting—a college bursar's not-very-modern livingroom.

Producer Gertrude Macy has given "The Happiest Years" an excellent production. Coley and Roerick have penned a promising play. But their combined efforts do not total up to a very rewarding evening in the theatre. Miss Wood's dragon of a mother-in-law is enough to blight what was evidently intended to be an enjoyable theatre piece. It's too convincing for comfort.

DAILY NEWS

APRIL 26, 1949

'Happiest Years' a Frail Comedy With Peggy Wood, June Walker

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Two charming comediennes, Peggy Wood and June Walker, came to the Lyceum Theatre last evening in a frail but cheerful play, "The Happiest Years." They and their fellow actors, and the director, James Neilson, got at least as much out of the comedy as the authors put into it, and provided the first audience with pleasant chuckles. It's a nice little play, nicely done, but I fear for its health now that it has been exposed to the rigors of Broadway commerce.

The authors, Thomas Coley and William Roerick, have contrived a story about a serious-minded war vet, who is going to college under the GI Bill. While he is grinding away at the subject of biology as it is found in books his pretty bride is pining away—and his mother-in-law has grave suspicions of him.

It is a bosom-of-the-family comedy in which the young couple are living at close quarters with the bride's parents, a boarder and a couple of visiting relatives. Messrs. Coley and Roerick seem to have good ears for the small talk of ordinary people in ordinary circumstances, and the types they present are familiar to us all. But ordinary people and ordinary circumstances are not enough to make a play these days, no matter how accurately and affectionately they are depicted.

An Amiable Cast.

Miss Wood portrays the suspicious parent pleasantly and artfully, and Miss Walker is a genial and comic visiting relative. Loring Smith is a jovial traveling salesman given to old jokes and bad puns, and there are nice appearances by Judy Parrish, Louisa Horton, Jessie Busley, James Goodwin and others, with Douglas Watson being the perfect grind as the biology student.

The characters and the jokes all are established in about the first 20 minutes, and from there on "The Happiest Years" doesn't go anywhere. Indeed, it would not make much difference if the three acts were played in reverse order, for there is little variation in them. I think the comedy would be dandy for Summer stock, but it is hardly important enough to exercise the talents of Miss Walker and Miss Wood.